

Tara has waited patiently for Christie Lind to finish the last hour of her working day. She has been standing in the shadows of a brownstone five steps above the sidewalk, across West Tenth Street from the townhouse that includes Lind's ground floor office suite. Outside in the long spring twilight, amid the nesting birds and the gathering Greenwich Village crowds accessorized with ZOE XL2 strollers or Babybjörns, Tara has become completely absorbed in her surroundings—light failing, manhole covers drooling noxious odors from underground, cabs honking at Ubers, Lyfts honking at bicyclists, the laughter of children, the mumblings of crazies and people on their cell phones—sinking into them like ink on paper.

Now, safely invisible from the entrance to the therapist's Tenth Street townhouse, Tara sees Christie emerge and head east. Tara finds it quite pleasing to overlook her like a god or an angel, in just the way Christie Lind metaphorically overlooks her during their sessions.

Thirty-five minutes later, she returns, loaded down with shopping bags full of premium food at premium prices, and walks up the steps to her home.

She isn't a therapist now. She is Christie, married to Marwyn Rusk.

As is her wont, Tara has done a Google search on them: Christie got five stars across the board, mother to Charlotte, a girl of fourteen, who was easy to find on Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter. Marwyn is a big kahuna, the managing partner of Millbank Partners LLP, a private equity firm in Westport, Connecticut. Tara has seen any number of photos of Marwyn online, not only on the impressive Millbank website but at financial and political functions, with the mayor and councilmen, in Washington at a dinner with any number of political and financial bigwigs. Tellingly, though, no women. After that, she had no interest in further web searches. She simply wanted to get a grip on Christie's rep, to feel reassured she made the right choice.

Now Christie is home. Tara sits down on the brownstone's stoop and watches the darkened windows glow bright lemon. Downstairs and upstairs both. Christie and Marwyn own the whole building. Nice, Tara thinks. No tenants. Probably a garden out back, as well. She closes her eyes,

picturing it: a fistful of scraggly grass eternally yearning for sun, a tree that needs pruning and is never going to get it, maybe some geraniums and tulips in cut-off wine barrel containers bought at Pier 1. An old-fashioned iron bench and some metal chairs like they have in the Tuileries. That would be wonderful. But not as wonderful as a chocolate Lab named Hickory.

With a rumbling down the street, a giant moving van heaves into view like a battleship. With a squeal of brakes it comes to a stop. It is black and gold, with the words **MASTERPIECE LLC, WE MOVE TREASURES RIGHT** painted on its massive side. Moments later a couple of burly men emerge from the cab, begin to slowly make their way to the rear. It looks like a family is moving into the brownstone just east of Christie's.

The noise and exhaust intrude on Tara's thoughts, and the huge van blocks her perfect view of Christie's brownstone. The hour is growing late anyway. She rises and heads east, intending to go straight home to her fifth-floor walkup in Alphabet City. But on the way she feels the need to stop at Seventh Haven to see how Angelo is doing—he has returned for the third time. The kid has gotten under her skin.

The moment she comes through the door, she knows something bad has happened, and Suzanne's face, pale as a midwinter's morning, as she comes toward her, tells her all she needs to know.

"When?" she says.

"About an hour ago." Suzanne shakes her head. "We tried, but you know, if they want to die, they'll find a way to do it."

"Is he still here?"

She nods unhappily. "This time there was no saving him. The cops have been called, but naturally they have more important things to do, so who knows when they'll show."

"I want to see him."

Suzanne nods. "Sure."

They proceeded down the central corridor, past intake, triage, and the OR. Suzanne lifts an arm. "He's in here." She opens a door on their left, stands back to allow Tara to step inside.

And there is Angelo, his face a blotchy red black, the tip of his tongue protruding from between bloodless lips. The ligature marks around his neck are raw and livid. A jolt lances through her like an ice pick. What if this was Sophie? What if

this is how her sister ended up? She shivers, trying to breathe, but the air seems caught in the back of her throat.

“What did he use?” Tara asks thickly, coming closer.

Suzanne sighs. “His belt.” This is far from her first suicide rodeo.

Tara reaches out, places her hand on the side of Angelo’s cheek, cool, dry, like a fallen leaf trod under bare feet.

“Goddammit,” she says.

Behind her, Suzanne stands with her fingers clasped in front of her. “I called M. She should be here soon. Perhaps you want to wait for her.”

But Tara doesn’t. She turns and, without a word, steps out of the room, back down the corridor, and out into the street. Night has fallen; time to hurry home. As usual, her building’s cramped entryway and narrow stairwell reeks of pot and the well-entrenched sweat of desperation. And, it being Friday, the stench of fried cod radiates from old Mrs. Lombardi’s ground floor apartment. Tonight it makes Tara’s eyes water, sticks in her throat like the spine of a bony fish.

Home. A downtrodden apartment she has sublet—she doesn’t want her name on the lease—from a grad student spending a year at architectural school in Milan. The place is grimy and homey at the same time. It is in back, the windows overlooking a single plane tree, dusty, scabrous, and forlorn. Dying from pollution and lack of light. A silver Mylar balloon, almost completely deflated now, is caught in its arthritic fingers. The view, as well as the one-bedroom apartment itself, suits her needs. It is cheap and as anonymous as anything in New York can be. She has a little money but has no place to spend it anyway.

Taking a Dos Equis Ambar from the minifridge, she stares into the fridge’s chilly depths at just about nothing—a half-eaten container of yogurt; a paper box with a red Chinese pagoda stamped on the side, full of desiccated brown rice; a single sour pickle in a jar, floating like a dead body. And in the tiny freezer? Nothing but ice turned a vague yellow from disuse. She isn’t hungry anyway.

She throws herself on the broken-backed sofa and tries to block out Angelo’s face, black and bloated. The beer bottle sits on the steamer trunk table. A last droplet of cold water slides down one side. Inescapable sounds of the tenement wash over her, but they mean nothing to her, like static on a radio tuned to a station too far away to hear clearly.

She is detached, an electric cord that hasn't been plugged in. And she thinks of the swimmer on the wall in Christie's office. She feels more connected to her than she does to the people around her.

She starts to get up, to get herself another beer, but her throat constricts painfully. Ever since the fire, ever since she awakened in a shabby motel room in Tucumcari, New Mexico, her memory of the previous six months is as blurred as a windshield in a rainstorm.

I should have waited for M, she thinks. M, who at lunch said, "You and I have a lot in common. You're running away from yourself; I'm running away from my family. I guess that's why I trust you." Her smile had struck Tara like a backhand blow. "I do trust you, Tara."

After I've lied and lied to you, Tara thinks. What kind of friend am I? Unbidden, almost against her will, an answer rises up like a goblin in the night . . .

"The wages of sin is death."

Nine-year-old Tara stood in the wings of the great stage beneath the pure-white tent, the air foaming with the religious zeal her mother had whipped up, heard her mother's striking oratorical voice. The tone she summoned from deep inside her, used only at her revival performances. "The wages of sin is lawlessness." Her mother's arms opened wide, embracing her audience, rapt, febrile. Hanging on every word as they clutched the crosses hanging around their necks, sold at a rich profit before the beginning and after the end of each performance. "And the wages of lawlessness is corruption of the soul, the sure and ever-present terror of hell—the eternal damnation of the soul." She grasped the air in front of her, as if beseeching the congregation. "Death leads to eternal life, with the help and grace of our savior, Jesus Christ. But sin brings annihilation—the end of all things."

Is that where I am now? Tara asks herself now, trembling. At the end of all things?

Sometime during the night, a punishing sleep arrives, like a car crash. Within its depths the nightmare arises and once again ensnares her in its dreadful tentacles.

Her eyes open. Early-morning light flutters past the curtains. Still enwebbed in the sticky strands of her recurring dream of being pursued through the forest on fire, she lies on her

back, paralyzed. Fear strikes her like a physical blow. She tries to move her arms, her legs, tries to turn her head from side to side. Nothing. She cannot budge even a millimeter. She knows from experience that the best thing to do is to allow herself to sink into the paralysis. Fighting it is futile, but her mind is as frantic as a bird trapped in a cage.

Finally, her body is released from its prison, and she weeps.